Chua Kok Yee, *Without Anchovies*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2010. 176 pp. ISBN 978-983-3221-27-1.

Without Anchovies is a first collection of short stories by Chua Kok Yee, a commercial controller by profession but whose love for writing finally finds proof in this maiden output. The collection has twenty-two stories on varied topics and themes but all set in Malaysia, making itself a tapestry of Malaysian life, especially urban life, in all forms and colours.

In general, the stories are written in a simple, breezy style that suggests a contemporary sensibility and a goal towards a popular audience. They have a strong sense of the quotidian, the everyday, that should make the stories familiar and accessible to the urbanised Malaysian reader. The stories usually have urban settings – the LRT, malls, suburban homes, bars, city sidewalks, etc. Simultaneously, there is a tenuous attachment to a cultural past that is steadily weakening in light of modernity and urban preferences. Thus, the allusions to kampung life, forgotten traditions and the supernatural.

Stylewise, the collection is a mixed bag of nuts. There is narrative confidence and gravitas in stories such as "Sambal Without Anchovies,"(which deserves to be the title story in the collection), "Moving Home," "Perfect Prefect," and "Vampire and Werewolf." Some stories will succeed as popular tales, e.g. "A Cemetery Story," "Dead Cougar," "Embracing Your Shadow." Others such as "You Are What You Eat," "Saviours in the Night," need a surer hand. They are perhaps indicative of the writer's birthing pains.

The relative brevity of the stories is also worth mentioning. The average length of a story is less than ten pages; in fact, there is one that takes up only two pages. While some readers may regard the stories as vignettes (small slices of Malaysian life that can be complete or otherwise), I see a privileging here of the subgenre of very short fiction, variously called "short short stories, sudden, postcard, minute, furious, fast, quick, skinny and micro-fiction" (Gurley 1). The two page "Monthly Winner" can certainly qualify as flash fiction. The brevity of the stories may be seen as reflective of the staccato rhythms of urban life (which is what the stories are about) which impose limitation on reading time. It may also be a stylistic decision to pare off "frills and lace until you're left with nothing but the hard, clean-scraped core of a story" (Gurley 1). The collection therefore easily lends itself to a quick read during an LRT ride, a fifteen minute coffee break, or a toilet stop in the freeway. Indeed, it is a busy person's literary fare in the course of a fast paced day.

Malaysian fiction in English has always been evocative of a post-independence, postcolonial, ethnic-defined Malaysian life. The stories in this collection no longer show political or ethnic chaffing and seem quite

comfortable in their own skins. What they do contain is a kind of cultural or psychical map of a people who are now defined by new national achievements and the lifestyles that result from them.

The accomplishment of this collection is its intimate portrayal of ordinary Malaysian life mostly in an urban setting. The stories disclose the cultural transitions most Malaysians undergo as a result of the country's economic development and entry into the modern/cyber age. These transitions herald silent conflicts that involve the individual's relationships with family, with place and with one's psyche.

Urban life as used in the stories can be a setting, an assumption, a catalyst, a raison d'etre, a discourse or a complete episteme. Most of the events in the stories can happen only in city streets or city establishments. The attempted mugging in "Courage," the romance in "Embracing Your Shadow," or the hit and run in "Smoking Can Kill" need urban locations and assumptions. Furthermore, the city is depicted as a place of loss – of humanity, romance, natural responses, empathy, opportunities and self-worth. Urban indifference ironically allows the mugger and the mugged to indulge in a conversation in "Courage" that eventually gives them back the human connection that otherwise would have been absent. A man falls in love with a woman he sees across the street. She remains separated from him by traffic and urban detachment; she becomes the unattainable object of his desire which consequently preserves a moment of romance in his otherwise ordinary life. A girl slumps down in an LRT station and eats her dinner in front of bemused fellow passengers, giving a non-place such as the train station a shed of honest humanity in the form of hunger. These stories seem to want to recuperate significant human emotions and experiences that city life may have repressed or buried, asserting life in a place of loss.

But city streets are not the only sites of loss because one also sees the psychical deprivation in the domestic space. A woman discovers that her husband has become a stranger in "Saviours in the Night"; a father robs his daughter of a gift to her mother in "The Gift"; a mother envies her daughter the latter's freedom and professional opportunities in "Thieving Daughter." All stories are set in suburban homes in an urban context.

A great loss caused by city life is the erosion of the past. The impetus towards progress compels a pragmatic perspective regarding old ways and old things, thus traditions and old places which have outlived their utilitarian purposes are either commercialised to regain their usefulness or abandoned. Sometimes, change, especially for materialistic purposes, is not healthy. In "Wall Dragons," ordinary lizards mutate into exotic but lonely animals as the persona begins independent living away from family and friends. He remarks: "Perhaps, certain things in life should never change" (166).

The most illustrative of this loss are "Sambal Without Anchovies" and "Moving Home." The first story chronicles beginnings, how a family built social structures of roles and affection around a *nasi lemak* food stall. A ubiquitous establishment in Malaysian terrain, the nasi lemak food stall is tradition, a comfort place for comfort food. While there are many such stalls, each one boasts of its gustatory distinction and performs the function of identity markers. Hanif, the owner's successful son, wants to turn his father's food stall into something more lucrative by cooking the sambal differently, by not using banana leaves anymore. But his father stubbornly resists his efforts. Hanif sees the food stall as a commercial enterprise, but later on understands that his father sees it as proof of family and as receptacle of memories.

"Moving Home" depicts social mobility in terms of residences. The couple in the story buys a new house, a mark of upward mobility in Malaysian society. But the husband is attached to his old home where he was conceived and born, where he grew up. Meanwhile, he begins to see strange things, such as the crack on the wall similar to that in the old home, or the cabinets that have already been sold even before they moved out. One night, thieves enter their room and try to harm them but their old dining table appears out of nowhere and strikes the thieves down. The couple's lives were saved by their old house. I would like to put this puzzling tale in the context of spirit of place, the genius loci, an ancient wisdom that connects people to their abode. The husband has a long time affinity with the old house and the house provides protection in return even if he has already left it. The upward social transition of the couple inadvertently cuts the ties between man and place solidified by years of connection, a loss brought about by rising incomes and the desire for more comfortable but less personalistic lifestyles.

The emergence of a new urban lifestyle has likewise brought about a cultural and psychical dislocation that has generated unusual responses, as can be seen in two dominant motifs in the stories: the deviant and the macabre. The first consists of characters who commit extraordinary transgressions in pursuit of impossible goals within a highly fluid society. The deviation can be momentary or singular, as in the case of the doctor in "The Hippocratic Oath" who breaks the sacred medical oath to rid the world of one powerful but abusive husband. Other characters transgress logic and acceptability more radically by entering the sphere of insanity and delusion, of murder and abnormal mental states to escape an oppressive world ("The Circus Interview") or to preserve an ideal one ("Perfect Prefect," "My Number One"). Quite striking are the characters of the last two. Both are serial killers. Timothy of "Perfect Prefect" kills people guilty of small but irritating violations, e.g. the girl who always double parks, the man who sells cigarettes to children, the man who continuously talks on his mobile phone inside a movie theatre. Timothy's world is one of regulations. He desires a civility, a compliance with rules, that

creates order and structure in everyday life. Such compliance is necessary in the urban site to control chaos and make life sustainable. His is a need for predictability and certainty that the indeterminacy of urban life has negated. The unnamed character of "My Number One" kills women with whom he has had relationships. He preserves their bodies and in the story talks about them with the woman who caused it all, his first love. Earlier in the story, this woman leaves the kampung to go to college in the city. Her departure did not have an overt effect on the man at first but the crimes prove that the abandonment must have scarred him deeply, spurring the mad impulse to kill. Like in the previous story, the killing spree is an assertion of control over circumstances that overwhelm the character. Both deviants desire to preserve, in the first case social order and in the second, constancy, that which modern life threatens. Individualistic people and social offenders have no place in the modern civil space; the pressure of modern necessities renders love insignificant and transient.

The other motif is the use of the macabre as a criticism of modern urban life. The macabre takes on the form of grim tales of the supernatural, hinting at one, a forgotten connection to the spiritual or mythical, and two, a darkness that has invaded this connection. Ghostly romance underpins "An Untrue Love Story." A dead mother rebels against tradition in the afterlife and humorously orders her son to send her young handsome men in "Dead Cougar." The macabre takes a dangerous turn in "A Cemetery Story" and "Vampire and Werewolf." In the first story, the internet is ironically used to write on familiar places in Kuala Lumpur. Entitled "City of Shared Stories," the piece attracts comments from readers but the one that attracted the most number is "A Cemetery Story." The persona realises that he is being written to by dead people who want him to be their voice to the outside world. Once again the genius loci rears its head, this time in the form of souls who have been forgotten and whose knowledge of place have been compromised by the continuous transformation of their landscape. The supernatural and cyberspace interlock in the virtual world of lost memories. The presence of the forgotten souls in cyberspace may therefore be seen as a resistance against urban forgetfulness as well as a reclamation of spaces no longer remembered.

Even more macabre is the altered reality of a couple in "Vampire and Werewolf." The couple, whose relationship began in a McDonald's joint, are bonded by their tendency towards extreme unconventionality, which leads them to imagine themselves as a vampire and a werewolf, perhaps influenced by a Hollywood movie with a similar preoccupation. It becomes serious when the man starts to kill to supply the woman with fresh blood. And yet it is in the midst of such horror that they prove love and commitment to each other. The story seems to suggest that the world of the ordinary or normalcy is not conducive to genuine love, that one has to search for another reality to find it. It

is ironic that only in the world of monsters is true love realised. Oxymoronic is the story's articulation of tenderness as a product of death and brutality.

The deviants and the macabre are discursive representations of the city as inhuman, abnormal and horrific and yet in the stories they are as much quotidian as getting petrol or buying a burger. In fact, part of the horror comes from the fact that they are quotidian, thereby rendering urban life as a dystopia concealed by glitzy homes and sophisticated amenities, but like an impatient demon, creates unexplainable havoc. The psychic, even spiritual, sundering is unmistakable, despite the use of fantasy and humour. And even for this alone, the stories are memorable.

Without Anchovies is an honest and creative rendition of Malaysian urban life. As first fruits, the collection portends of outstanding harvests in the future.

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Works Cited

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